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No More Parades: History and Personal Experience in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End*

> *I am not interested in these [historical] facts but they have a bearing on my story.*
>
> *The Good Soldier*

The sense of crisis which informs Modernist art and literature manifests itself through content as well as form: on the one hand, by means of the explorations of psychological uncertainty, and on the other, by undermining traditional methods of representation through formal experimentation. The perspective of nearly a century makes it possible to discern the general direction of the quest undertaken by Modernist writers. While, as Brian McHale argues, postmodernist fiction focuses on ontological issues, such as a definition of reality, the self, the ontological status of the literary text and the world it projects, the Modernist novel is more concerned with the process of cognition:

> The dominant of Modernist fiction is epistemological. That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as . . . How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? . . . What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? (McHale 9)

Ford's two masterpieces, *The Good Soldier* (1915) and *Parade's End* (1924–8), are attempts to do exactly that: both trace the movements of a searching mind, analyse the extent to which reality is knowable, and try to discern – and distinguish between – truth and falsehood.

What strikes the reader of Ford's novels is the extent to which his protagonists use history as a context for their personal experience. While their cognitive dilemmas derive of course directly from their own entanglements with other people, history appears to offer them a possibility of finding some validity for their predicament: some explanation of what they have lived through. Whether such hopes materialise or not is another matter, but the degree to which Dowell and Tietjens become aware of history's paradoxical unpredictability and, at the same time, continuity suggests a possible attempt to emphasise the way in which an individual is ultimately conditioned by a historical context.

The Good Soldier

Early in the novel, Dowell insists that he is "not interested" in history (*GS* 36), but his protestations strike a curious note as his narrative keeps circling around a variety of historical references. As his tale progresses, it becomes apparent that he *is*, in fact, interested in history, at least in so far as it might help him in his epistemological quest. Bewildered by his own experience and totally confused about its meaning, Dowell picks up bits of history as a weapon in his struggle to maintain psychological and emotional integrity. However inadequate and fragmentary his knowledge of history may be, it is ultimately all he has to fall back on in his attempt to understand "the hearts of men" (*GS* 12).

This view of history emerges with Dowell's first mention of Peire Vidal, a Provençal troubadour of the turn of the 12th and 13th century, a protégé of Richard I and a documented – however sketchily – historical character. As Dowell narrates a story from Vidal's biography – a stormy love affair with a cruel and manipulative chatelaine known as La Louve, the She-Wolf – it becomes clear that what fascinates him the most is the fact that it contains all the elements that his own story is made of. To him, Vidal's "lamentable story" (*GS* 15) is "culture . . . and at the same time it's so funny . . . and it's so full of love" (*GS* 18). The possibility of

being able to relate his own predicament – also a story of "love, poverty, crime, religion and the rest of it" (*GS* 18) – to someone else's experience appeals to him with its promise, however deceitful, of revealing a truth that might already have been discovered. For Dowell, the troubadour is clearly a tempting figure in that he conceives of him as a man who, despite his "lamentable" life, has somehow managed to maintain his integrity.

The story of Vidal, told at the beginning of his narrative, is thus not an accidental digression: it is an attempt to find a way of articulating one's own experience through history. A more intense instance of history and personal experience merging together in the novel is the famous scene at the Marburg castle. Florence has organised a trip to see the "Protest,"[1] a formal declaration of dissent made by a group of German princes and free cities against the Catholic anti-Reformation movement. As Florence stops by the glass case which contains the document, she makes a pass at Ashburnham, and Leonora realises that her husband is going to have another affair. In her reading of the novel, Carol Jacobs points out that much of the dispute between Catholicism and Protestantism is focused around the issue of transubstantiation, i.e. the interpretation of Christ's Eucharistic sentence, "This is my body" (Jacobs 85–8). Although the sentence is never uttered during the scene, it is clearly implied by Florence who, in touching Ashburnham's hand, is offering her body to him; and by Leonora who, shocked and horrified by Florence's initiative, professes her Catholicism as if reminding Florence that Ashburnham's body has been given to her in marriage, and therefore is hers. Saunders's comment on Ford's habit of making significant that which is absent or concealed (433) would be hard pushed for a better example: the whole Marburg scene is constructed around the multi-layered meaning of a sentence which is never uttered.

While the scene is a climactic point in Florence's relation with Ashburnham, it is also particularly significant for Dowell, whose attempts to comprehend his own experience inevitably depend on making sense out of the way in which Catholicism (Leonora) and Protestantism (Florence and Ashburnham) become integrated with an elaborate pattern of sex-

[1] The document to which Florence is referring is not the Protest, but the doctrinal statement drawn up at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529 (see Stannard 37).

ual desire. Like in the case of Vidal's story, in this case he too tries to link his own life to historical facts:

> And we went up winding corkscrew staircases and through the Rittersaal, the great painted hall where the Reformer and his friends met for the first time under the protection of the gentleman that had three wives at once and formed an alliance with the gentleman that had six wives, one after the other. (*GS* 36)

Dowell's reference to Henry VIII and Ludwig the Courageous,[2] whom he identifies not by their names but by the number of their wives, immediately reveals that he is, in fact, turning to history for an explanation of the paradoxical mixture of polygamy and chastity in which he has been caught. It is hardly accidental that in his own case the numbers are exactly the same: Ashburnham has been involved with six women (Leonora, the Kilsyte case girl, La Dolciquita, Mrs Basil, Maisie Maidan, and – finally – Florence) whereas he himself admits to have loved three: Leonora, Maisie, and Nancy. History inevitably enters Dowell's personal experience, repeating its pattern and placing his story in a much wider cognitive context.

The Peire Vidal reference and the Protest scene are not the only instances where history becomes part of Dowell's own story. Dowell starts off by comparing his experience to the Sacco di Roma (*GS* 11), a fitting image for a story of destruction and destructiveness, but a more contemporary association becomes firmly established as the date of August 4 begins to appear with sinister regularity. August 4 is Florence's birthday; on August 4 she sets out on a trip around the world with her uncle and Jimmy; exactly a year later, also on August 4, she becomes Jimmy's mistress; on August 4 she elopes with Dowell; August 4 is the date of the Protest scene, and of Florence's suicide. Saunders notices how, for a book

[2]The person Dowell is referring to is Landgrave Philip the Magnanimous, allowed dispensation by Luther to marry a second wife. "Ludwig the Courageous" is probably Ludwig IV, who died on a crusade. After his death in 1228 his wife Elizabeth came to live in Marburg, where she became a nun; hence Dowell's reference to "the castle of St. Elizabeth of Hungary" (*GS* 32). The cult of Elizabeth drew pilgrims to the city until Philip the Magnanimous put an end to it in 1527 by establishing in Marburg a Protestant University, the first in the world. Stannard offers a useful clarification of the confusion in his notes to the text (Stannard 32–7).

published in 1915, *The Good Soldier* "stands out for its complete silence about the war." The silence indeed is complete – apart from the date, resounding throughout the narrative like an apocalyptic prophecy, and – in Saunders's words – "rendering [the novel's] silence about the war eloquent" (435).

Whether the choice of this particular date for some of the novel's most ominous events was accidental or deliberate is, of course, disputable. Most of the novel was written before the outbreak of the war on August 4, 1914; however, Saunders's research into textual variations indicates that, although Ford seems to have first used the date accidentally, i.e. before the war was declared, he went over the manuscript afterwards, introducing changes which made the date more prominent, thus turning what had begun as a coincidence into aesthetic effect (436–7). (These alterations, in turn, may or may not have been the reason for the curious fact that, according to the chronology of events in the novel, Dowell finishes his story towards the end of 1915 or at the beginning of 1916, i.e. not only after the war has begun, but also after the novel has actually been published.[3])

The ominous date is not the only reason why the novel's silence about the war becomes eloquent. The title itself makes the war conspicuous by its absence, provoking associations that cannot be dismissed with a simple claim that "Ford was always bad at naming his books."[4] Ford himself admits that the title resulted from his publisher's rejection of the novel's original title, "The Saddest Story." In his dedicatory letter, added to the novel twelve years after it was first published, Ford explains how John Lane insisted that such a gloomy title "would at that time [March 1915] render the book unsaleable" (*GS* 5). Feeling more and more irritated by Lane's letters and telegrams, Ford suggested ironically that perhaps "The Good Soldier" would sound better, and was apparently horrified when it turned out that the publisher had taken his sarcastic remark at face value.

The publisher's claim that at the time of war the reading public needs more uplifting titles is understandable enough, and so is Ford's exasperation; but there is a lot more to Ford's suggestion than the apparent ab-

[3]The most thorough analysis of the novel's chronology can be found in Cheng.

[4]See e.g. Macauley, qtd. in Meixner 152.

surdity of sarcasm. The phrase, as Saunders observes (420), is imported from *Much Ado About Nothing*:

> MESSENGER: And [Benedict is] a good soldier too, lady.
> BEATRICE: And a good soldier to a lady; but what is he to a lord?
> MESSENGER: A lord to a lord, a man to a man; stuffed with all honourable virtues.

It is possible to see why Dowell would think of Ashburnham as a "good soldier," even if his soldiering is mostly metaphorical: the war he fights is to a large extent against his own passions rather than a more tangible enemy. In Dowell's view he *is* a good soldier to a lady since he dies in combat, fighting his love for Nancy in order to preserve her chastity, and his virtues are ultimately more honourable than Leonora's shallowness and hypocrisy.

But for all that, it is the context of the immediate historical reality – together with the ominously recurrent date of 4 August – that lends the novel's title its resounding applicability. The death of Ashburnham marks the end of an era: the feudalism in which he believed so whole-heartedly is gone, its noble ideals of a magnanimous and dutiful lord caring for his faithful tenants no longer practicable in a world ruled by profitability. Likewise, the war in which "good soldiers" went to fight, and eventually win, against Germany, would bring a hitherto noble world to its end. It would destroy any sense of order and stability left over from the previous era; the change it was to make to society – its values and hierarchies – would be incalculable and irreversible. Without any explicit reference to the war, *The Good Soldier* manages to convey this apocalyptic vision of a world coming to its end. It looks upon the Edwardian period with the kind of nostalgia one feels for times long and irrevocably gone; it shudders at the thought of times to come.

Parade's End

The sense of an unknowable reality which Ford's juxtaposition of history and personal experience conjures up in *The Good Soldier* would become collectively clear to the survivors of the Great War: it is precisely this

awareness of existential panic that dominates the narrative of Christopher Tietjens's life. Written after Ford's own war experience – he enlisted in the army in 1915 and fought until 1917, when he was invalidated home after being shell-shocked in a tour of duty – *Parade's End* is an attempt to render the ultimate destruction of the secure, orderly, pre-war reality.

In this sense the tetralogy is very different from *The Good Soldier*, which – despite its frequent recourse to history – had no such historical event to dominate the characters' life. But in another sense, like *The Good Soldier*, *Parade's End* too is a record of an effort to grasp, as well as to come to terms with, the siginificance of his own personal experience; this is easily seen not only in the first and the last of the four novels, where no part of the war is portrayed, but also in the other two, where the horrors of the battlefield are depicted with the chilling accuracy of an observant and sensitive witness. After all – at least on the plot level – the tetralogy is not primarily about the war but about Tietjens's disastrous marriage to Sylvia, a woman whose mindless, obstinate cruelty has few matches among literary villains. It is this marriage that repeatedly demands of Tietjens definitions and redefinitions of his own system of values, cognitive machanisms, role in society – or, in short, his own identity. From this point of view, the war is of secondary importance: as Julian Barnes said in his review of Ford's most recent biography, *Parade's End* is a "story of a soldier who goes to the public arena of war to forget his private business, only to find that marital squeaks can drown the sound of gunfire."

But as the narrative unfolds, it becomes obvious that the war is, in fact, central in Tietjens's experience in that it is the final confirmation that the world he has known and understood no longer exists. In his study of Ford's tetralogy Malcolm Bradbury aptly explains the significance of the Great War to its contemporaries and survivors:

> To some degree the war, ironically, paradoxically, justified Modernism, by achieving many of the things it had sought – the defeat of Victorianism and Edwardianism, romanticism and sentimentality, naive dreams of manly adventure and progressive certainties about the future of modern European culture, established concepts of culture, continuity and tradition. (xix)

For Tietjens, the war means exactly that: a Yorkshire squire with his ancient manor house, with his inheritance of a noble ideal of honour and

magnanimity, an English gentleman, "the last Tory," he is bound to find himself lost and out of place in a world ruled by ruthless profitability, personal whims, blind bureaucracy, and disregard for others. Like Ashburnham, Tietjens is a good soldier fighting for a lost cause: the England he knows and understands no longer exists.

There is, however, an aspect in which the tetralogy differs considerably from *The Good Soldier*, and it is the condition in which Tietjens is left at the end of the narrative. Dowell is denied any future: he exits in the novel deprived of identity and reduced to the role of Nancy's nurse; Tietjens is offered a glimmer of hope. His world may have crumbled down, his ancestral estate of Groby is inhabited by an American *nouveau-riche* and the ancient oak tree has been cut down, but he has Valentine, her love, and the prospect of a child (Valentine is pregnant), not to mention the fact that the dreadful Sylvia has finally agreed to divorce him. It would be impossible, of course, to argue that Ford intended to give his readers a Hollywood-style happy-ending: Tietjens's experience is far too painful and too bitter for any walks into the sunset, and Ford makes it perfectly clear in the last novel of the series which is focalised through Tietjens's dying brother Mark. But there is still the question of what exactly has enabled Tietjens to emerge from his ordeal with a prospect of a life, something Dowell was so utterly deprived of. After all, both of them have lived through a nightmare – of deceit, of disillusionment, of betrayal, humiliation, and denial; both have been made to realise that their understanding of reality is at best inadequate and in most cases ridiculously wrong. Why, then, is Tietjens offered, as it were, a second chance, a possibility of picking up the pieces and arranging them into a new whole?

Critics usually like to see Ford's tetralogy as a rendition of one world coming to its end and another appearing in its place – a new, post-war order replacing the old way of life. What is perhaps too little recognised is that Tietjens's strength – the strength that Dowell lacks – paradoxically seems to have come from his war experience; from the fact that he has actually seen the worst fears materialise. Unlike Dowell, who is forced to collapse before the Unknown, Tietjens is actually given a chance to get to know it; his sense of cognitive confusion can, in a way, be "justified." This, obviously, is not to say that the war helps Tietjens understand: in a typically Modernist way, Ford's narratives reverse the classic novelistic formula which takes the protagonist from lack of knowledge

to knowledge, constructing an epistemological hiatus which ultimately must result in a sense of fragmented consciousness. But where Dowell is left paralysed, Tietjens can still grope about, even if due to an instinct rather than a conscious effort of will – the same instinct that (as he has seen) makes wounded soldiers crawl to safety for as long as they physically can.

And this is perhaps where Ford's vision of the relation between history and individual experience can be most fully seen: individual experience is a miniature reflection of history. At the beginning of *The Good Soldier*, Dowell says that "the death of a mouse from cancer is the whole sack of Rome by the Goths" (*GS* 11): *Parade's End* takes this idea up and painstakingly goes on to prove it. What happens to Tietjens – the falling apart of his world, of his value system, of his epistemology – is what happens to a nation touched by war, and the other way round: what happens to a nation touched by war is what happens to an individual. This is one of the two certainties Tietjens is left with, the other one being that there will be no more parades.

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